

“H.D. wrote in a state of more or less constant terror” (4)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) February 22, 2019

(4th in a series of posts on H.D.)

Finding H.D.: A Community Exploration of the Life and Work of Hilda Doolittle

The next event is “H.D.’s Moravian Roots in Bethlehem” by Moravian’s Craig Atwood, Tuesday, February 26, 6:30-8 at the Bethlehem Area Public Library.

Here now is the fourth slice of Prof Seth Moglen’s January 30 “How I Fell in Love with H.D.” lecture at the BAPL in the FINDING H.D. series.

Followers of this thread will now know a little bit of H.D.’s life, her relation to Bethlehem, the nature of her poetry, and its personal impact on Moglen, the Gadfly Foundation Visiting Professor of Bethlehem Studies.

But H.D. is a poet – isn’t it time that we read some of her poetry? Hold on – I know that for some of you poetry may be like garlic to a vampire. Gadfly confesses that the only “C” in his PhD program was in “Modern Poetry.” That was one long hot summer in South Bend, let me tell you. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a snap. T.S. Eliot . . . Ezra Pound . . . etal – Oiii. But let’s listen to Seth wrap meaning and music around two poems from H.D.’s *Trilogy* volume.



AUDIO UNAVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE

“18 years ago a bunch of men, a small group of men committed a criminal act, high-jacked a plane, 3000 people died. It was a catastrophic moment, and what we did as a society in our fear and our rage was launch two wars which 18 years later we’re still fighting. In those wars almost 7000 US soldiers have now died. 58,000 men and women have suffered severe life-changing injuries. A soldier, a veteran, kills himself or herself every 65 minutes. H.D. would not have been surprised by any of this. This was the story she was trying to tell in *Trilogy*. . . . which is to say, why is it in the face of violence our response is to

perpetuate the cycle? And what would it involve for us to do something different?”

“*Trilogy* . . . which H.D. wrote . . . in 1944-1945, she was living in London, the bombs were falling night after night after night . . . absolutely systematic civilian bombing. H.D. wrote in a state of more or less constant terror. . . . H.D. knew that the munitions produced in the Bethlehem Steel plant which had been sold at the start of the war to the Germans as well as to the U.S. Army were part of what threatened her life and were inflicting this terror. And she wrote *Trilogy* as an attempt to respond to this sense of a war that would not end.”

“This [poem #1] is not abstract for H.D. Every single night for 140 consecutive nights German war planes were dropping bombs randomly on civilians in London. And every night H.D. was in fear for her life. . . . Emotionally how do we respond to this experience of terror? . . . How do you respond to leave your apartment and you go out in the morning and you see that many of your neighbors are dead?”

from H.D.’s “The Flowering of the Rod”

I

O the beautiful garment,
the beautiful raiment —
do not think of His face
or even His hands,
do not think how we will stand
before Him;
remember the snow
on Hermon;
do not look below
where the blue gentian
reflects geometric pattern
in the ice-floe;
do not be beguiled
by the geometry of perfection
for even now,
the terrible banner
darkens the bridge-head;
we have shown
that we could stand;

we have withstood
the anger, frustration,
bitter fire of destruction;
leave the smoldering cities below
(we have done all we could),
we have given until we have no more to give;
alas, it was pity, rather than love, we gave;
now having given all, let us leave all;
above all, let us leave pity
and mount higher
to love — resurrection.

“[In poem #2,] H.D. is tackling an enormously challenging problem that I think everybody in our society has to contend with one way or another. And that is when you live in a nation at war, when you live in a time of war, when you feel a sense of hopelessness about your own capacity to love, what difference does my love make, what do I do with my love, with my desire to live in peace with people in a world in which the cycle of war just goes on and on? . . . What do you do with that part of yourself that believes in humane connection to love? . . . H.D. is thinking of the Bethlehem Steel plant, obsessing — what she’s thinking about is . . . what does it mean to live in a world where we are preparing all the time to kill? We are producing massive instruments of destruction. . . . How do you nurture your capacity to love? “

II

I go where I love and where I am loved,
into the snow;
I go to the things I love
with no thought of duty or pity;
I go where I belong, inexorably,
as the rain that has lain long
in the furrow; I have given
or would have given
life to the grain;
but if it will not grow or ripen
with the rain of beauty,
the rain will return to the cloud;
the harvester sharpens his steel on the stone;
but this is not or field,
we have not sown this;
pitiless, pitiless, let us leave

The-place-of-a-skull
to those who have fashioned it.

Remember: the next event in the year-long series is “H.D.’s Moravian Roots in Bethlehem” by Moravian’s Craig Atwood, Tuesday, February 26, 6:30-8 at the Bethlehem Area Public Library.
Gadfly will remind you.